

The train was slowing down for Keegan. A whistle from the locomotive ahead had warned the two alert young men in the smoker to that effect, and they arose to leave the train. Both were neatly and quietly dressed. One carried a medium-sized camera with the necessary tripod and accessory satchel. The other carried no impediments of any sort. Both were smoking cigars, evidently not of expensive variety, judging by the unaromatic atmosphere thereabouts.

“Can’t see what Bland shipped us up to this one-horse dump for,” grumbled Skip Handlon, the one who carried the camera. He was the slighter of the two and perhaps half a head shorter than the other. “Do you know anything about it?”

“Not much,” confessed the other as they alighted from the smoker. “All I can tell you is that Bland sent for me early this morning, told me to get a story out of this Professor Kell and to drag you along. After we get there you are to do as judgment dictates. But I remember that the Chief was specific as regards one thing. You are to get the proff’s mug. Don’t forget.

The old fellow may growl and show fight, but it's up to you to deliver the goods--or, in this case, get them. Don't depend on me for help. I expect to have troubles of my own." Thus gloomed Horace Perry, star reporter for the Journal.

"This Keegan place"--Handlon was using his eyes swiftly and comprehensively--"isn't worth much. Can't see how it manages to even rate a name. Some dump, all right!"

"You said a couple mouthfuls."

"How's the train service, if any?"

"Rotten. Two trains a day." The other was anything but enthusiastic. "We've a nice long wait for the next one, you can bet. Now, just add to that a rough reception after we reach the old lion's lair and you get a nice idea of what Bland expects from his men."

Handlon made a wry face at this. "The bird who first applied the words 'Hard Boiled' to the Chief's monniker knew something."

“You don’t know the half of it,” retorted Perry encouragingly. “Just wait and see what a beaut of a fit he can throw for *your* benefit if you fail to do your stuff--and I don’t mean maybe.”

Old Man Bland owned the Journal, hired and fired his crew and did his own editing, with the help of as capable an office gang as could be gotten together. It is quite possible that “Hard Boiled” Bland demanded more from his men than any other editor ever has before or since. Nevertheless he got results, and none of his experienced underlings ever kicked, for the pay was right. If a hapless scribe had the temerity to enter the editorial sanctum with a negative report, the almost invariable reply had been a glare and a peremptory order, “Get the copy.”

And get it they did. If a person refused an interview these clever fellows generally succeeded in getting their information from the next most reliable source, and it arrived in print just the same.

Of such a breed was Perry. Handlon, being a more recent acquisition to the staff, was not yet especially

aggressive in his work. On this account the former took keen zest in scaring him into displaying a bit more sand.

The train had disappeared around a bend and the two reporters felt themselves marooned. Keegan, without question, was a most forlorn looking spot. A dismal shanty, much the worse for weather, stood beside the track. In front, a few rotting planks proclaimed that once upon a time the place had boasted a real freight platform. Probably, back in some long-forgotten age, a station agent had also held forth in the rickety shanty. A sign hung on each end of the crumbling structure on which could still be deciphered the legend "KEEGAN." On the opposite side of the track was an old, disused siding. The only other feature of interest thereabouts was a well traveled country road which crossed the tracks near the shanty, wound sinuously over a rock-strewn hill and became lost in the mazes of an upland forest.

There being no signboard of any kind to indicate their destination, the two, after a moment's hesitation, started off briskly in a chance direction. The air was

hot and sultry, and in the open spaces the sun beat down mercilessly upon the two hapless ones. As they proceeded into the depths of the forest they were shielded somewhat from the worst of the heat.

Gradually upon their city-bred nostrils there stole the odor of conifers, accompanied by a myriad of other forest odors. Both sniffed the air appreciatively.

“This is sure the life,” remarked Perry. “If I weren’t so darn thirsty now....” He became lost in mournful thought.

A considerable time passed. The newspaper men trudged wearily along until finally another bend brought them to the beginning of a steep descent. The forest had thinned out to nothing.

“Seems to me I smell smoke,” blurted out Handlon suddenly. “Must be that we are approaching the old party’s lair. Remember? Bland said that he--”

“Uh huh!” the other grunted, almost inaudibly. Now that they seemed to be arriving at their destination something had occurred to him. He had fished from

his pocket a sheaf of clippings and was perusing them intently. "Bland said, 'Get the copy'," he muttered irrelevantly and half to himself.

The clippings all related directly to Professor Kell or to happenings local to Keegan. Some were of peculiar interest. The first one was headlined thus:

Mysterious Disappearance Of Robert Manion
And Daughter Still Unsolved

The piece contained a description of the missing man, a fairly prosperous banker who had been seen four days previously driving through Keegan in a small roadster, and one of the girl, who was in the car with him. It told that the banker and his daughter were last seen by a farmer named Willetts who lived in a shack on the East Keegan road, fleeing before a bad thunder storm. He believed the pair were trying to make the Kell mansion ahead of the rain. Nothing more of the Manions or their car had been seen, and their personal effects remained at their hotel in a nearby village unclaimed. The heavy rain had of course effectually obliterated all wheel tracks.

Another clipping was fairly lengthy, but Perry glanced only at the headlines:

“Kell Still Carrying On His Strange Experiments
Has Long Been Known to Have Fantastic Theories.
Refuses to Divulge Exact Methods Employed, or
Nature of Results”

Still another appeared to be an excerpt from an article in an agricultural paper. It read:

“A prize bull belonging to Alton Shepard, a Keegan cattle breeder, has created considerable sensation by running amuck in a most peculiar manner. While seemingly more intelligent than heretofore, it has developed characteristics known to be utterly alien to this type of animal.

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of the case is the refusal of the animal to eat its accustomed food. Instead it now consumes enormous quantities of meat. The terrific bellow of the animal’s voice has also undergone a marked

change, now resembling nothing earthly, although some have remarked that it could be likened to the bay of an enormous hound. Some of its later actions have seemingly added further canine attributes, which make the matter all the more mystifying. Veterinaries are asking why this animal should chase automobiles, and why it should carry bones in its mouth and try to bury them!”

The last one read in part:

“Professor Kell has been questioned by authorities at Keegan relative to the disappearance there last Tuesday of Robert Manion and his daughter. Kell seemed unable to furnish clues of any value, but officials are not entirely satisfied with the man’s attitude toward the questions.”

Somewhat bewildered by these apparently unrelated items, the reporter remained lost in thought for quite a space, the while he endeavored to map out his course of action when he should meet the redoubtable Professor. That many of the weird occurrences could be traced in some way to the latter’s door had

evidently occurred to Bland. Furthermore, the Old Man relied implicitly upon Perry to get results.

It must be said that for once the star reporter was not overly enthusiastic with the assignment. Certain rumors aside from the clippings in his hand had produced in his mind a feeling of uneasiness. So far as his personal preference was concerned he would have been well satisfied if some cub reporter had been given the job. Try as he would, however, he could offer no tangible reason for the sudden wariness.

He was aroused from his absorption by his companion.

“Thought I smelled smoke a while back, and I was right. That’s the house up in the edge of the pines. Deep grounds in front and all gone to seed; fits the description exactly. Thank Heaven we struck off from the station in the right direction. This stroll has been long enough. Come out of it and let’s get this job finished.”

Suiting the action to the words Handlon started off at a brisk pace down the hill, followed at a more moderate rate by Perry. At length they came within full sight of the grounds. Extending for a considerable distance before them and enclosing a large tract of land now well covered with lush grass, was a formidable looking wall. In former days a glorious mantle of ivy had covered the rough stones; but now there was little left, and what there was looked pitifully decrepit. They continued their progress along this barrier, finally coming upon a huge iron gate now much the worse for rust. It stood wide open.

The road up to the house had long since become overgrown with rank grass and weeds. Faintly traceable through the mass of green could be seen a rough footpath which the two followed carefully. They met no one. As they approached the night of black pines the mass of the old mansion began to loom up before them, grim and forbidding.

Instinctively both shivered. The silence of the place was complete and of an uncannily tangible quality. Nervously they looked about them.

“How do you like it, Skip?” The words from Perry’s previously silent lips broke upon the stillness like a thunderclap. The other started.

“I should hate to die in it,” Handlon answered solemnly. “I’ll bet the old joint is haunted. Nobody but a lunatic would ever live in it.”

“I get a good deal the same impression myself,” said Perry. “I don’t wonder that Bland sent two of us to cover the job.”

As he spoke he mounted a flight of steps to a tumbledown veranda. There was no sign of a door bell on the weather-beaten portal, but an ancient knocker of bronze hanging forlornly before him seemed to suggest a means of attracting attention. He raised it and rapped smartly.

No answer.

Possessing all the attributes of the conventional reporter and a few additional ones, Perry did not allow himself to become disheartened, but merely

repeated his summons, this time with more vim.

“Well, Horace,” grinned Handlon, “it does look as if we were not so very welcome here. However, seems to me if you were to pick up that piece of dead limb and do some real knocking with it.... The dear Professor may be deaf, you know, or maybe he’s--”

“Skip, my boy, I don’t know as we ought to go in right now after all. Do you realize it will soon be dark?”

“To tell you the truth, Horace, I’m not stuck on this assignment either. And I feel that after dark I should like it even less, somehow. But, gee, the Old Man....”

“Oh, I’m not thinking of quitting on the job. We don’t do that on the Journal.” Perry smiled paternally at the photographer. Could it be he had purposely raised the other’s hopes in order to chaff him some more? “But I was thinking that it might be a good idea to look about the outbuildings a bit while we have a little daylight. Eh?”

Handlon looked disappointed, but nodded gamely. He

delayed only long enough to deposit his camera and traps behind a grossly overgrown hydrangea by the steps, then, with a resigned air, declared himself ready to follow wherever the other might lead.

Perry elected to explore the barn first. This was a depressing old pile, unpainted in years, with what had once been stout doors now swinging and bumping in the light breeze. As the two men drew nearer, this breeze--which seemed to sigh through the place at will--brought foul odors that told them the place was at least not tenantless. In some trepidation they stepped inside and stood blinking in the half darkness.

“Pretty Polly!”

“Good God! What was that?” Handlon whispered. He knew it was no parrot’s voice. This was a far deeper sound than that, a sound louder than anything a parrot’s throat could produce. It came from the direction of a ruinous stall over near a cobwebbed window. As Perry started fearfully toward this, there issued from it a curious scraping sound, followed by a

fall that shook the floor, and a threshing as of hoofs. Now the great voice could be heard again, this time uttering what sounded strangely like oaths roared out in a foreign tongue. Yet when the newspaper men reached the stall they found it occupied only by a large mule.

The animal was lying on its side, its feet scraping feebly against the side of the stall. The heaving, foam-flecked body was a mass of hideous bruises, some of which were bleeding profusely. The creature seemed to be in the last stage of exhaustion, lying with lips drawn back and eyes closed. Beneath it and scattered all over the stall floor was a thick layer of some whitish seeds.

“That’s--why that’s sunflower seed, Horace!” Handlon almost whimpered. “And look! Look in that crib! It’s full of the same stuff! Where’s the hay, Horace? Does this thing--”

He was interrupted by a mighty movement of the beast--a threshing that nearly blinded the men in the cloud of bloodstained seeds it raised. With something

between a curse and a sob, the mule lunged at its crib as if attempting to get bodily into it. But no: it was only trying to perch on its edge! Now it had succeeded. The ungainly beast hung there a second, two, three. From its uplifted throat issued that usually innocuous phrase, a phrase now a thing of delirious horror:

“Pretty Polly!”

With a crash the tortured creature fell to the floor, to lie there gasping and moaning.

Skip Handlon left that barn. Perry retained just enough wit to do what he should have done the instant he first saw the animal. He whipped out his automatic and fired one merciful shot. Then he too started for the outside. He arrived in the yard perhaps ten seconds behind Handlon.

“Good Heavens, Perry,” gibbered Handlon. “I’m not going to stay around this place another minute. Just let me find where I left that suffering camera, that’s all I ask.”

“Easy now.” Perry laid a hand on his companion’s shoulder. “I guess we’re up against something pretty fierce here, but we’re going to see it through, and you know it. So let’s cut out the flight talk and go raise the Professor.”

Handlon tried earnestly to don a look of determination. If Perry was set on staying here the least he could do was stay with him. However, could Perry have foreseen the events which were to entangle them, he probably would have led the race to the gate. As it was, he grasped a stick and marched bravely up toward the front door.

A sudden commotion behind him caused him to wheel sharply around. Simultaneously a yell burst from Handlon.

“Look out, Horace!”

What he saw almost froze the blood in his veins. From a tumbledown coach house had issued an enormous wolf-hound which was now almost upon them, eyes flaming, fangs gleaming horribly.

So unexpected was the attack that both men stood rooted in their tracks. The next moment the charging brute was upon them, and had bowled Handlon off his equilibrium as if he were a child. The unfortunate photographer made a desperate attempt to prevent injury to his precious camera, which he had but a moment earlier succeeded in retrieving, and in doing so fell rather violently to the ground. Every moment he expected to feel the powerful jaws crunch his throat, and he made no effort to rise. For several seconds he remained thus, until he could endure the suspense no longer. He glanced around only to see Perry, staring open-mouthed at the animal which had so frightened them. Apparently it had forgotten the presence of the two men.

Handlon regained his feet rather awkwardly, the while keeping a watchful eye on the beast, of whose uncertain temper he was by now fully aware. In an undertone he addressed his companion.

“What do you make of it?” he wanted to know. “Did the critter bite you?”

“No. That’s the queer part of it. Neither did he bite you, if you were to think it over a minute. Just put his nose down and *rammed* you, head on.”

The photographer was flabbergasted. Involuntarily his gaze stole again in the direction of the offending brute.

“What on earth--” he began. “Is he sharpening his teeth on a rock preparatory to another attack upon us? Or--What the deuce *is* he doing?”

“If you ask me,” came astonishingly from the watchful Perry, “he’s eating grass, which is my idea of something damn foolish for a perfectly normal hound, genus lupo, to be--Look out!”

The animal, as if suddenly remembering the presence of the men, suddenly charged at them again, head down, eyes blazing. As before, it made no effort to bite. Though both men were somewhat disconcerted by the great brute they held their ground, and when it presented the opportunity the older reporter planted a terrific kick to the flank which sent the animal

whimpering back to its shed behind.

“Score one,” breathed Handlon. “If we--” At a sudden grating sound overhead, he stopped.

Both turned to face the threatening muzzle of an ancient blunderbuss. Behind it was an irate countenance, nearly covered by an unclipped beard of a dirty gray color. In the eyes now glaring at them malevolently through heavily concaved spectacles they read hate unutterable. The barrel of the blunderbuss swung slightly as it covered alternately one and the other. Both sensed that the finger even now tightening on the trigger would not hesitate unduly. Being more or less hardened to rebuffs of all kinds in the pursuance of their calling, the reporters did not hesitate in stating their purpose.

“What?” yelled the old man. “You dare to invade my grounds and disturb me at my labors for such a reason? Reporters! My scientific research work is not for publicity, sirs; and furthermore I want it understood that I am not to be dragged from my laboratory again for the purpose of entertaining you

or any others of your ilk. Get away!”

Without further ado the window was slammed down, a shutter closed on the inside, and once more the silence of the dead descended upon the spot. The two men grinned ruefully at each other, Handlon finally breaking the stillness.

“My idea of the world’s original one-sided conversation. We simply didn’t talk--and yet we’re supposed to be reporters. You’ve got to hand it to the Proff, Horace, for the beautiful rock-crusher he just handed us.”

“You didn’t think we had anything easy, did you?” said Perry irritably. “He’ll change his tune presently, when--”

Handlon’s jaw dropped. “You don’t mean you’re going to take any more chances! Would you rouse him again after the way he treated us with that gun? Besides, the train....”

Perry bent a scathing glance at his companion. “What

on earth has the train to do with our getting the Professor's confession of crime or whatever he has to offer? You evidently don't know Bland--much. I deduce that a lot of my sweetness has been wasted on the desert air. Once more, let me assure you that if you propose to go back without the Proff's mug on one of those plates you might as well mail your resignation from *here*. Get me?"

The other wilted.

"I wonder," Perry ruminated as he stared in the direction of the shed wherein the canine monstrosity had disappeared. "Do you suppose that you can get a snap of the old boy's mug if I can get him to the window again? If you can do that, just leave the rest to me. I've handled these crusty birds before. What say?"

"Go as far as you like." The photographer was once more grinning as he unslung his camera and carefully adjusted a plate in place. Everything at last to his satisfaction he gripped flash pan and bulb.

“I’m going to make some racket now,” announced Perry grimly. “If Kell shows up, work fast. He may shoot at you, but don’t get excited. It’s almost dark, so his aim *might* be poor.”

At this suggestion his companion showed signs of panic, but the other affected not to notice this. There came a deafening hullabaloo as Perry beat a terrific tattoo on the ancient door. Followed a deep silence, while Perry leaped back to stand in front of Skip and his camera. After perhaps a full minute’s wait he once more opened up his bombardment, to jump quickly back to the camera as before. This time he had better success. The window was again opened and the muzzle of the blunderbuss put in its appearance. Handlon stood close behind Perry as he silently swung the camera into a more favorable position for action. The face at the window was purple with wrath.

“You damned pests! Leave my grounds at once or I shall call my hound and set him upon you. And when--”

Crack! Flash! Click! Perry had made a sudden

sidewise movement as Handlon went into action.

“Much obliged, Professor,” said Perry politely. “Your pose with that old cannon is going to be very effective from the front page. The write-up will doubtless be interesting too. Probably the story won’t be quite so accurate as it would be had you told it to us yourself; but we shall get as many of the details from the natives hereabouts as we can. Good-day to you, sir!”

Motioning to the other he turned on his heel and started down the driveway. It was an old trick, and for a long moment of suspense he almost feared that it would fail. Another moment--

“Wait!” The quavering voice of the irascible old villain had lost some of its malice. “Come back here a minute.”

With simulated reluctance the two slowly retraced their steps. “Is there something else, sir?”

“Perhaps....” The old man hesitated, as if pondering upon his words. “Perhaps if you care to step in I can

be of assistance to you after all. It occurs to me that possibly I have been too abrupt with you.”

“I am very glad that you have decided to cooperate with us, Professor Kell,” answered the reporter heartily, as they ascended the steps. The old man’s head disappeared from the window and shortly the sound of footsteps inside told of his approach. Finally the oaken door swung open, and they were silently ushered into the musty smelling hallway. Though outwardly accepting the Professor’s suddenly pacific attitude, Perry made up his mind to be on his guard.

As they entered what had evidently been the parlor in bygone days, an oppressive, heavy odor smote their nostrils, telling of age-old carpets and of draperies allowed to decay unnoticed. On the walls hung several antique prints, a poorly executed crayon portrait of a person doubtless an ancestor of the present Kell, and one or two paintings done in oil, now badly cracked and stained. Everything gave the impression of an era long since departed, and the two men felt vaguely out of place. Their host led them to a pair of dilapidated chairs, which they accepted

gratefully. The ride to Keegan after a hard day's work had not tended to improve their spirits.

"Now to business." Perry went straight to the point, desiring to get the interview over as soon as possible. "We have heard indirectly of various happenings in this vicinity which many think have some connection with your scientific experiments. Any statement you may care to make to us in regard to these happenings will be greatly appreciated by my paper. Inasmuch as what little has already been printed is probably of an erroneous nature, we believe it will be in your own best interest to give us as complete data as possible." Here he became slightly histrionic. "Of course we do not allow ourselves to take the stories told by the local inhabitants too literally, as such persons are too liable to exaggerate, but we must assume that some of these stories have partial basis in fact. Any information relative to your scientific work, incidentally, will make good copy for us also."

Perry gazed steadily at the patriarch as he spoke. For a moment, a crafty expression passed over the old man's face, but as suddenly it disappeared. Evidently

he had arrived at a decision.

“Come with me,” he wheezed.

The two newspaper men exchanged swift glances, the same thought in the mind of each. Were they about to be led into a trap? If the old man’s shady reputation was at all deserved they would do well to be wary.

Perry thought swiftly of the clippings he had read and of what gossip he had heard, then glanced once more in the direction of Handlon. That worthy was smiling meaningly and had already arisen to follow the Professor. Reluctantly Perry got to his feet and the three proceeded to climb a rickety stairway to the third floor. The guide turned at the head of the stairs and entered a long dark corridor. Here the floor was covered with a thick carpet which, as they trod upon it, gave forth not the slightest sound.

The hall gave upon several rooms, all dark and gloomy and giving the same dismal impression of long disuse. How could the savant endure such a depressing abode! The accumulation of dust and cobwebs in these long forgotten chambers, the

general evidence of decay--all told of possible horrors ahead. They became wary.

But they were not wary enough!

The uncouth figure ahead of them had stopped and was fumbling with the lock of an ancient door.

Instinctively Perry noted that it was of great thickness and of heavy oak. Now the Professor had it open and was motioning for them to enter. Handlon started forward eagerly, but hurriedly drew back as he felt the grip of the other reporter's hand on his arm.

"Get back, you fool!" The words were hissed into the ear of the incautious one. Then, to the Professor, Perry observed: "If you have no objection we would prefer that you precede us."

A look of insane fury leaped to the face of the old man, lingered but an instant and was gone. Though the expression was but momentary, both men had seen, and seeing had realized their danger.

They followed him into the chamber, which was soon

illuminated fitfully by a smoky kerosene lamp. Both took a rapid survey of the place. Conceivably it might have been the scene of scientific experiments, but its aspect surely belied such a supposition. The average imagination would instantly pronounce it the abode of a maniac, or the lair of an alchemist. Again, that it might be the laboratory of an extremely slovenly veterinary was suggested by the several filthy cages to be seen resting against the wall. All of these were unoccupied except one in a dark corner, from which issued a sound of contented purring, evidently telling of some well-satisfied cat.

The air was close and foul, being heavy with the odor of musty, decaying drugs. In every possible niche and cranny the omnipresent dust had settled in a uniform sheen of gray which showed but few signs of recent disturbance.

“Here, gentlemen,” their host was saying, “is where I carry on my work. It is rather gloomy here after dark, but then I do not spend much time here during the night. I have decided to acquaint you with some of the details of one or two of my experiments. Doubtless

you will find them interesting.”

While speaking he had, mechanically it seemed, reached for a glass humidor in which were perhaps a dozen cigars. Silently he selected one and extended the rest to the two visitors.

After all three had puffed for a moment at the weeds, the old man began to talk, rapidly it seemed to them. Perry from time to time took notes, as the old man proceeded, an expression of utter amazement gradually overspreading his face. Handlon pulled away contentedly at his cigar, and on his features there grew an almost ludicrous expression of well-being. Was the simple photographer so completely at ease that he had at length forsaken all thought of possible danger?

As Professor Kell talked on he seemed to warm to his subject. At the end of five minutes he began uncovering a peculiar apparatus which had rested beneath the massive old table before which they were sitting. The two men caught the flash of light on glass, and a jumble of coiled wires became visible.

Was the air in the laboratory getting unbearably close? Or was the queer leaden feeling that had taken possession of Perry's lungs but an indication of his overpowering weariness? He felt a steadily increasing irritation, as if for some strange reason he suddenly resented the words of their host, which seemed to be pouring out in an endless stream. The cigar had, paradoxically, an oddly soothing quality, and he puffed away in silence.

Why had the room suddenly taken on so hazy an aspect? Why did Handlon grin in that idiotic manner? And the Professor ... he was getting farther and farther away ... that perfecto ... or was it an El Cabbajo? What was the old archfiend doing to him anyhow?... Why was he laughing and leering at them so horribly?... Confound it all ... that cigar ... where was it?... Just one more puff....

Blindly he groped for the missing weed, becoming aware of a cackle of amusement nearby. Professor Kell was standing near the spot where he had fallen and now began prodding him contemptuously with his toe.

“Fools!” he was saying. “You thought to interfere with my program. But you are in my power and you have no hope of escape. I am unexpectedly provided with more subjects for my experiments. You will....” His words became hazy and unintelligible, for the hapless reporter was drifting off into a numb oblivion. He had long since lost the power to move a muscle. Out of the corner of an eye, just before he lost consciousness altogether, he perceived Handlon lying upon the floor still puffing at the fateful drugged cigar.

Eons passed.

To the reporter came a vision of a throbbing, glaring inferno, wherein he was shaken and tossed by terrific forces. His very vital essence seemed to respond to a mighty vibration. Now he was but a part of some terrific chaos. Dimly he became aware of another being with whom he must contend. Now he was in a death struggle, and to his horror he found himself being slowly but surely overpowered. A demoniac grin played upon the features of the other as he forced the reporter to his knees. It was Handlon.... Once more he was sinking into soft oblivion, the while a horrid

miasma assailed his nostrils. He was nothing....

Slowly, and with infinite effort, Perry felt himself returning to consciousness, though he had no clear conception of his surroundings. His brain was as yet but a whirling vortex of confused sounds, colors and--yes, odors. A temporary rift came in the mental cloud which fettered his faculties, and things began to take definite shape. He became aware that he was lying upon his back at some elevation from the floor. Again the cloudy incubus closed in and he knew no more.

When he finally recovered the use of his faculties it was to discover himself the possessor of a violent headache. The pain came in such fearsome throbs that it was well nigh unendurable. The lamp still sputtered dimly where the professor had left it. At the moment it was on the point of going out altogether. The reporter noticed this, and over him stole a sense of panic. What if the light should fail altogether, leaving him lying in the dark in this frightful place! Still dizzy and sick, he managed to rise upon his elbows enough to complete a survey of the room. He was still in the laboratory of Professor Kell, but that

worthy had disappeared. Of Handlon there was no sign. The mysterious apparatus, of which he now had but a vague remembrance, also had vanished.

His thoughts became confused again, and wearily he passed a hand over his brow in the effort to collect all of his faculties. The lamp began to sputter, arousing him to action. Desperately he fought against the benumbing sensation that was even again stealing over him. Gradually he gained the ascendancy. He struggled dizzily to his feet and took a few tentative steps.

Where was Handlon? He decided his friend had probably recovered from the drug first and was gone, possibly to get a doctor for him, Perry. However, he must make some search to determine if Skip had really left the premises.

As he walked through the open door the lamp in his hand gave a last despairing flicker and went out. From there he was forced to grope his way down the dark hall to the stairs. Just how he reached the lower floor he was never able to remember, for as yet all the

effect of the powerful drug had not worn off. He had a dim recollection of being thankful to the ancestor of Kell who had provided such thick carpets in these halls. Thanks to them his footsteps had been noiseless, at any rate.

What was Kell's real object in giving them those drugged cigars? he wondered. How long had they been under the influence of the lethal stuff? Surely several hours. Upon glancing through a hall window he found that outside was the blackness of midnight.

Cautiously he explored the desolate chambers on the ground floor: the kitchen--where it could be plainly seen that cooking of a sort had been done--the barn, and woodshed. Not a living thing could he find, not even the huge wolf-hound which had attacked them in so strange a manner that afternoon.

By now he was quite frankly worried on Handlon's account. At that moment, could he have known the actual fate that had overtaken his companion, it is quite probable he would have gone mad. He stumbled back and into the dark front hall, shouting his friend's

name. The response was a hollow echo, and once or twice he thought he heard the ghost of a mocking chuckle.

At length he gave up the search and started for the door, intent now only upon flight from the accursed place. He would report the whole thing to the office and let Bland do what he pleased about it. Doubtless Handlon had already left. Then he stumbled over Handlon's camera. Evidently the Professor had neglected to take possession of it. That must be rescued, at all costs. He picked it up and felt the exposed plate still inside. He started again for the door.

What little light there was faded out and he felt stealing over him a horrid sensation of weakness. Again came a period of agony during which he felt the grip of unseen forces. Once more it seemed that he was engaged in mortal strife with Skip Handlon. Malevolently Handlon glared at him as he endeavored with all his strength to overcome Perry. This time, however, the latter seemed to have more strength and resisted the attack for what must have been hours.

Finally the other drew away baffled.

At this the mental incubus surrounding Perry's faculties broke. Dimly he became aware of a grinding noise nearby and a constant lurching of his body. At length his vision cleared sufficiently to enable him to discover the cause of the peculiar sensations.

He was in a railroad coach!

He took a rapid glance around and noted a drummer sitting in the seat across the aisle, staring curiously at him. With an effort Perry assumed an inscrutable expression and determined to stare the other out of countenance. Reluctantly the man glanced away, and after a moment, under Perry's stony gaze, he suddenly arose and chose a new seat in front of the car. Perry took to the solace of a cigarette and stared out at the flying telegraph poles. From time to time he noted familiar landmarks. The train had evidently left Keegan far behind and was already nearly into the home town.

For the balance of the ride the reporter experienced

pure nightmare. The peculiar sensations of dizziness, accompanied by frightful periods of insensibility, kept recurring, now, however, not lasting more than ten or fifteen minutes at a time. At such times as he was conscious he found opportunity to wonder in an abstracted sort of way how he had ever managed to get on the train and pay his fare, which must have been a cash one, without arousing the conductor's suspicions. Discovery of a rebate in his pocket proved that he must have done so, however. The business of leaving the train and getting to the office has always been an unknown chapter in Perry's life.

He came out of one of his mental fogs to find himself seated in the private editorial sanctum of the Journal. Evidently he had just arrived. Bland, a thick-set man with the jaw of a bulldog, was eyeing him intently.

"Well! Any report to make?" The question was crisp.

The reporter passed a hand across his perspiring forehead. "Yes, I guess so. I--er--that is--you see--"

"Where's Handlon? What happened to you? You act as

if you were drunk.” Bland was not in an amiable mood.

“Search me,” Perry managed to respond. “If Skip isn’t here old man Kell must have done for him. I came back alone.”

“You wha-a-t?” the irate editor fairly roared, half rising from his chair. “Tell me exactly what happened and get ready to go back there on the next train. Or--no, on second thoughts you’d better go to bed. You look all used up. Handlon may be dead or dying at this minute. That Kell could do anything.” He pressed the button on his desk.

“Johnny,” he said to the office boy, “get O’Hara in here on the double quick and tell him to bring along his hat and coat.”

He turned again to Perry, who was gazing nervously at the door. “Now tell me everything that happened and make it fast,” he ordered.

The reporter complied, omitting nothing except the

little matter of his mental lapses at the house of Professor Kell and later on the train. The incident of the drugged cigars seemed to interest the Old Man hugely, and Perry did not forget to play up Handlon's exploits in getting the picture of the Professor. All through the recital he was in a sweat for fear that he might have a recurrence of one of his brain spells and that Bland would become cognizant of it. When would the Chief finish and let him escape from the office? Desperately he fought to prevent the numbing sensation from overcoming him. All that kept him from finally fleeing the place in panic was the entrance of Jimmie O'Hara.

Slight, wiry and efficient looking, this individual was a specimen of the perfect Journal reporter. This is saying a good deal, for the news crew and editorial force of the paper were a carefully selected body of men indeed. Bland never hired a man unless experience had endowed him with some unusual qualification. Most of them could write up a story with realistic exactitude, being able in most cases to supply details gleaned from actual experience in one

walk of life or another.

Of this redoubtable crew probably the queerest was Jimmie O'Hara. Jimmie had just finished a sentence in the "pen" for safe-cracking at the time he landed the job with the Journal. Theoretically all men should have shunned him on account of his jailbird taint. Not so Bland. The Chief was independent in his ideas on the eternal fitness of things and allowed none of the ordinary conventions of humanity to influence his decisions. So Jimmie became one of the staff and worked hard to justify Bland in hiring him. His former profession gave him valuable sidelights upon crime stories of all kinds, and he was almost invariably picked as the man to write these up for the columns.

"Jimmie," said the Chief, "we have need of an experienced strong-arm man and all around second story worker. You are the only man on the force who fills the bill for this job. Perry here has just returned from Keegan, where I sent him to interview Professor Kell. Skip Handlon went with him, but failed to return. We want to know what happened to Skip. That is your job. *Get Handlon!* If he is dead let me know by

long distance phone and I'll have a couple of headquarters men down there in a hurry. Get a good fast car and don't waste any time. That's all."

O'Hara stopped long enough to get the location of Professor Kell's place fixed in his mind, then abruptly departed. Bland gazed after him musingly.

"The Professor will have some job to put anything over on that bird," he said grimly. "Personally, I'm sorry for the old soul."

After leaving the Journal office Jimmie proceeded directly to a certain stable where he kept his private car. It was a long, low speedster with a powerful engine, and capable of eating up distance. It was the work of a minute to touch the starter and back out of the yard.

For the next hour he held the wheel grimly while the car roared over the seventy-odd miles to Keegan. Would he be in time? At last a sign post told him that he was within five miles of the railroad crossing at Keegan. Now the headlights were picking out the

black outlines of the freight shed, and the next moment he had swept over the tracks. The luminous dial on his wrist watch notified him that he had been on the road but little over an hour, but his spirits somehow refused to revive with the knowledge.

About a mile beyond the station he drove the car into a dark wood road and parked it, turning off all lights. The rest of the way to the Professor's mansion he did on foot. Rather than approach from the front of the grounds he nimbly climbed a stone wall and, crossing a field or two, entered the stretch of woods which extended just behind the mansion. His pocket flashlight here came into use, and once or twice he gave a reassuring pat to a rear pocket where bulged a heavy Colt automatic.

What was that? He had approached very close to the rear of the house now. No lights were visible as yet, but unless he was greatly mistaken he had heard a muffled scream. He stopped in his tracks and listened intently. Again it came, this time with a blood-curdling cadence ending in what he would have sworn was a choking sob.

The little job of getting the old-fashioned rear window open was a mere nothing to the experienced O'Hara, and in a moment he was inside the house. His feet struck soft carpet. Catlike, he stepped to one side in order to prevent any hidden eyes from perceiving his form silhouetted in the dim light of the open window. He dared not use his flashlight for fear that the circle of light would betray his position, thus making him an excellent target for possible bullets. Following the wall closely he managed to circle the room without mishap. His searching fingers finally came in contact with a door frame, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Here there was nothing to bar his progress except some moth-eaten portieres. These he brushed aside.

The room which he now entered was probably the same into which the Professor had ushered Handlon and Perry the day before. There being still no sign of life about, the reporter decided to throw caution to the winds. He brought his flash into play. Quickly casting the powerful beam around the chamber he examined the place with an all-searching glance.

Nothing.

With a stifled oath he turned his attention to the other rooms in the immediate vicinity. The brilliant light revealed not the slightest trace of a person, living or dead. The sound must have come from the second story or from the cellar. He decided on the upper floor.

Feverish with impatience because of the valuable time he had already lost, he bounded up the heavily carpeted stairs two at a time. Now to his keen ears came certain faint sounds which told him that he was on the right track. Before him extended a long, dusty hall, terminating in a single heavy door. Several other doors opened at intervals along the corridor. One or two of these were open, and he threw the beam from his flash hastily into one after another of them. He saw only dusty and mildewed chamber furnishings of an ancient massive style.

Suddenly he pricked up his ears.

The door ahead of him was creaking slowly open. Instantly he extinguished his torch and leaped into the nearest room. Whoever was opening that end

door was carrying a lamp. What if the Professor had accomplices who might discover him and overpower him by force of numbers! O'Hara drew the automatic from his pocket, deriving a comforting assurance from the feel of the cold steel. Here was something no man could resist could he but get it into action. The light was now nearly abreast of his door, and for a sickening instant he thought the prowler was coming into the room. He held his breath. Now the lamp was at the open door, and now it was quickly withdrawn. After a breathless second he tip-toed forward and peered cautiously down the hallway.

About here it was that James O'Hara began to realize that this was going to be a horrible night indeed. He had wondered why the progress of the light had been so deathly slow. Now he knew why, by reason of what he saw--and what he saw made him feel rather sick. The man with the lantern was quite plainly Professor Kell, bent nearly double with the weight of a grotesquely big thing on his back, a thing that flung a dim, contorted shadow on the ceiling. And that thing was a dead man.

A corpse it was--the attitude proved that. With a numb relief O'Hara realized it was not the body of Skip Handlon. This had been a much larger man than Skip, and the clothing was different from anything Handlon had worn.

The light was now disappearing down the stairway. For a moment O'Hara felt undecided as to his next move. Should he follow Kell and his burden, or should he not take advantage of this fine opportunity to continue his search of the upper story? That scream still rang in his ears; there had been a very evident feminine quality in it, and the remembrance of that fact reproached him. Had he been guilty of mincing daintily about in this old house while a woman was being done to death under his nose, when a little bolder action on his part might have saved her?

Stepping once more into the hall he advanced to the door just closed behind the Professor and tried it, only to find it locked. Out of a pocket came several articles best known to the "profession"--a piece of stiff wire, a skeleton key and other paraphernalia calculated to reduce the obstinate mechanism to

submission. For a minute, two, three, he worked at the ancient lock; then, without a creak, the door swung open. A touch of oil to the hinges had insured their silence. Jimmie O'Hara believed in being artistic in his work, especially when it came to fine points, and he was.

He found himself in the same room where the drugged cigars had been proved the undoing of Handlon and Perry. In order not to alarm the Professor unduly by chance noises and perhaps invite a surprise attack upon himself, O'Hara closed the laboratory door behind him and let the lock spring again. Hastily he made search of the place. No trace of the missing reporter could he find, except two half-consumed cigars in a corner whence the Professor had impatiently kicked them.

On the big table in the center of the room, however, was an object which excited his interest. It was apparently nothing more or less than a giant Crookes tube, connected in some way with a complicated mechanism contained in a wooden cabinet under the table. Probably this apparatus was concerned in the

Professor's weird experiments which had so aroused the countryside. He studied it curiously, his eyes for the moment closed in thought, until a slight sound somewhere near at hand caused him to open them wide. Was the Kell returning?

Quickly he extinguished the lamp and glided to a nearby door, thinking to secrete himself here, and take Kell by surprise. To his consternation the door swung inward at a touch. He prepared instinctively for battle against any foe who might present himself. For a moment he held himself taut; then, nothing of an alarming nature having happened, he drew a swift breath of relief and flashed on his light. He gave vent to a low exclamation. The swiftly darting shaft from the torch had revealed the figure of a girl, bound and gagged.

The girl lay trembling on a wretched bed in a corner of the dilapidated old chamber. O'Hara crossed the room and bent over her. Still wary of a trap he glanced back in the direction of the laboratory door: all safe there. Jimmie made haste to remove the cruel gag from her mouth.

“Courage,” he whispered. “Half a minute and you will be free.”

He produced a knife with a suspiciously long blade and cut her bonds. He then assisted her to her feet, where she reeled dizzily. Realizing the need for fast action he made her sit down while he massaged the bruised arms and ankles, which were badly swollen from the tight ropes. The girl had apparently been in the grip of such terrible fright that she had temporarily lost her power of speech. Mentally he chalked up another score against the Professor as the girl made several ineffectual attempts to speak.

“Easy, kid,” Jimmie whispered. “Just sit tight, and when you feel able you can tell me all about it. I’m going to get him good for this, you can bank on that.”

She thanked him with a faint smile, and of a sudden she found her voice.

“Who are you? Where is father? Oh, tell me, please! I am afraid that horrible man has murdered him. Are you a servant here? Oh, I don’t know whom to trust.”

“My name is Jimmie O’Hara,” replied the reporter briefly; “and I hope you won’t worry about me. I am gunning for the Proff myself. Tell me as quickly as you can what you know about him.” He still kept an eye on the door of the adjoining laboratory. Any moment he expected to hear the sound of the old man’s approach. The room would make an ideal place to ambush the maniac, he had swiftly decided.

“I am Norma Manion. Please don’t delay, but see if you can locate father.” The girl’s voice was agonized. “I heard him groan a half-hour ago, and a little later came a terrific crash. Oh, I’m afraid he’s dead!”

Reluctantly Jimmie gave up the idea of ambushing the Professor.

“Wait here,” he commanded curtly. “If you hear a shot join me as soon as you can. I want to take him alive if I can, but....” With this parting hint he disappeared through the door into the laboratory. Down the carpeted hall he crept to the stairway. Here he stopped and listened, but to his sensitive ears came no sound from below.

“Must have gone down the cellar with the body,” he muttered. “Here goes for a general exploration.”

With more boldness than the occasion perhaps really justified he descended the stairs and proceeded to examine the ground floor rooms minutely. The first was the room through which he had made entrance to the house. It proved to be but a storeroom containing nothing of interest, and he soon decided to waste no more time on it.

The adjoining chamber, however, yielded some surprising finds. He had pushed back a dusty portiere to find himself in what could be nothing less than the Professor’s sleeping chamber. At present the bed was unoccupied, though it showed signs of recent use. The electric torch played swiftly over every possible corner which could constitute a hiding place for an assassin, revealing nothing. Now the ever-searching ray fell upon an old-fashioned dresser, on which was piled a miscellaneous array of articles. Here were combs, brushes, a wig, a huge magnifying glass, and a gold watch. With a barely suppressed exclamation, Jimmie pounced upon the gold timepiece.

Handlon's! So well did he know the particular design of his watch that he could have recognized it in the dark by sense of touch alone. So the old man was not averse to robbery among his other activities! The former two-story man thought fast. Handlon had probably been done in, and the body had been disposed of in some weird manner. The only thing that remained to be done, since the unlucky photographer was evidently past human help, was to cut short the Professor's list of murders.

With the intention of missing no essential detail O'Hara swept the ray of the searchlight around the chamber once more, but discovered no more of importance. Deciding that the sleeping chamber could yield no further clue he shut off the tell-tale ray and stepped noiselessly back into the next room. Here he groped his way around until he encountered a door, which stood open. A moment's cautious exploration with an outstretched foot revealed the top step of a descending staircase. No faintest glimmer of light was visible, but muffled sounds proceeding from the depths told him that someone was below.

With infinite care, feeling his way gingerly over the rickety old steps and fearful that an unexpected creak from one of the ancient boards would at any moment prove his undoing, he commenced the descent. Once a board did groan softly, causing him to stop in his tracks and stand with bated breath. He listened for sign of a movement below, while his heart loudly told off a dozen strokes. Stealthily he continued his progress, until finally soft earth under his feet told him he had reached the cellar bottom.

Now his straining eyes perceived a tiny bit of light, and simultaneously he became conscious of a deathly stench. The damp earth padding his footsteps, he advanced swiftly toward the source of light, which now seemed to lie in stripes across his line of vision. He soon saw that the stairs gave upon a small boarded-off section of the cellar proper, and light was seeping between the boards. Ah, and here was a rickety door, fortuitously equipped with a large knot-hole. O'Hara applied an eye to this--and what he saw nearly ruined even his cast iron nerve.

The Professor was working beside a heavy wooden

cask, from which issued the horrible stench. From time to time a sodden thud told that he was hacking something to pieces with an ax. Now and then he would strain mightily at a dark and bulky thing which lay on the floor, a thing that required considerable strength to lift. It seemed to be getting lighter after each spasm of frenzied chopping. For a second Kell's shadow wavered away from the thing, and the enervated newspaper man saw it plainly. His senses almost left him as he realized that he was witnessing the dismemberment of a human body.

As he hacked the fragments of tissue from the torso the fiend carefully deposited each in the huge cask. At such times a faint boiling sound was heard, and there arose an effluvium that bade fair to overcome even the monster engaged in the foul work. At last the limbs and head had been entirely removed. The Professor evidently decided that the trunk should be left whole, and he put his entire strength into the job of getting it into the cask. It was almost more than he could negotiate, but finally a dull splash told that he had succeeded.

At this moment Jimmie O'Hara came out of his trance. The horrible proceeding had left him faint and shaken, and he wished heartily that he could leave the disgusting place as fast as his legs could carry him. But there was still work to be done and he resolved to get it over.

The lantern! First he must put that out of commission. The maniac would then be at his mercy. Slowly, steadily he stole through the doorway, his eyes glued to the Professor's back. Now he was within a yard of the lantern, and he drew back his foot for the kick.

Next moment Jimmie found himself gazing into the glaring eyes of his intended victim. Instinctively he struck out with the clubbed automatic, but the blow must have fallen short, or else the Professor had developed an uncanny agility. Now to his horror he saw the flashing blade of the bloodstained ax raised on high. He had no time to dodge the blow. He pressed the trigger of the Colt from the position in which he held it.

The bullet grazed the upraised arm. The ax fell

toward O'Hara from fingers lacking strength to retain it, and he grasped it by the handle in midair. The next moment the assassin collected his wits and sprang at him. Silently, the breath of both coming in gasps, the two men strove, each clawing desperately at the other's throat. The reporter fought with the knowledge that should he lose he would never again see the light of day, the other with the fear of the justice that would deal with him.

The maniac hugged his arms tightly about Jimmie, pinioning him so tightly that the reporter could not use his gun. At length their convulsive movements brought the men close to the lantern, and the next instant the cellar was plunged in darkness. A second later the Professor tripped over some hidden obstruction and fell, dragging his opponent with him to the earthen floor. To Jimmie's surprise there was no further movement from the body beneath him. Could the old villain be playing possum? He cautiously shifted his hold and grasped the hidden throat. He pressed the Professor's windpipe for a moment, but there was no answering struggle. Slowly the truth

dawned upon him. The heavy fall to the floor had rendered the older man insensible.

He must work fast. Reaching into his pocket he brought out the ever handy electric torch and flashed it over the features of his prisoner. Kell was breathing heavily. With dexterous hands O'Hara swiftly went through the old man's pockets, removing all which might tend to make that worthy dangerous--an ugly looking pistol of large caliber, a blackjack similar to his own and a small bottle.

The latter item Jimmie examined curiously, finally uncorking it and inhaling the contents. He inhaled, not wisely but too well. The fumes from the vial were nigh overpowering, and he reeled back nauseated. The cork he hastily replaced. Just what the nature of the powerful stuff was he never attempted to discover. One acquaintance was enough.

He staggered to his feet and got the lantern lighted, then sat, gun in hand, waiting for his prisoner's return to his senses. This was becoming increasingly imminent, judging by certain changes in the

Professor's respiration. Finally there came a series of shuddering movements as the man attempted to raise his battered body.

"Get up, you damned butcher," ordered Jimmie, "and march upstairs. And just remember that I've got you covered; don't make any false moves." He prodded the prostrate form of the by now glaring fiend before him. The stench of the place was nearly overcoming him, and again he felt an overwhelming desire to dash madly from that den of evil, and once more breathe God's fresh air. Under the stimulus of several shoves the Professor finally won to his feet and stumbled up the stairs. Jimmie was taking no chances and kept the automatic sharply digging into the ribs of his prisoner. The fight, however, seemed temporarily to have been all taken out of the old man, and he made no resistance as the reporter drove him on up to the laboratory.

The room he found exactly as he left it. At a word from him Norma Manion came from her hiding place in the horrible room where she had been kept prisoner.

With an hysterical scream she fell limply to the floor. The sight of her father's murderer had proved too much for her. Forgetting his prisoner for the moment Jimmie sprang to the girl's side.

Kell chose this moment to make a dash for freedom. His footsteps, however, were not as noiseless as he had intended, and O'Hara whirled just in time to see his quarry about to throw open the hall door. Jimmie dove for his gun, only to encounter the Professor's mysterious vial, which, though forgotten, still lay in his pocket. With no time to think, he acted purely upon instinct. His arm drew back and the bottle flew straight for the Professor's head.

By a miracle the missile missed its mark. Came a shivering crash, as the bottle struck a stud in the massive door. Of a sudden recalling the terrific potency of the contents of that particular bottle, Jimmie gasped in dismay. Norma Manion's safety drove every other thought from his mind. At any cost he must remove her from the proximity of those lethal fumes.

Hastily and without a backward glance, he gathered the girl into his arms and dashed into the room where he had first found her. Ascertaining that she had but swooned he placed her gently on the bed. In some perplexity as to his next move he stared at the beautiful face now so wan and white. Queer that he hadn't noticed the fact before--she was beautiful. He even took a second look, then noting a continued absence of all sound from the laboratory decided to investigate.

Gingerly he pushed open the door, sniffing the air cautiously as he advanced. To his nostrils gradually came a slight scent, which though almost imperceptible made his senses reel. As he approached the hall door he found the atmosphere heavy with the soporific vapors from the broken vial, and he staggered drunkenly.

He gave a start of surprise. On the floor, lying in a grotesque huddle which suggested a most unpleasant possibility, was the inert body of Professor Kell.

Jimmie bent over the body and put an experienced ear

to the heart. Yes, there as a faint beat--very faint. Even as he listened he perceived a slight increase in the respiration. Now the breath began coming in great, choking gasps, only to die suddenly to next to nothing. At last with a rueful sigh Jimmie reached to his hip and produced the private O'Hara flagon. He stooped over the Professor's form once more and by dint of much prying at clenched jaws managed to force a sizeable charge of fiery liquid down the old man's throat. Jimmie had just begun to entertain a strong hope that this latter effort would bring the Professor to life, when his keen ear detected signs of a commotion below.

He sprang from his position over the slowly reviving Kell and leaped to a vantage point beside the door. A blackjack miraculously appeared from some hidden part of his anatomy and the ever-dependable Colt also became in evidence. Now came the banging of a door, muffled voices, a crash as of a chair overturned in the dark. Up rolled a horrible oath, and the same was rendered in a voice to Jimmie sweetly familiar. Came the sound of footsteps on the stairway and several

persons coming along the hall.

“Where in hell is Jimmie?” roared a wicked voice. “If he’s met with any monkey business in this hell-hole I’ll see that the damned place burns to the ground before I leave it!”

Delightedly Jimmie jerked open the door.

“Still alive, Chief,” he chirped as the Old Man strode into the laboratory. Bland was followed by Perry, who seemed to be in a sort of daze. Bringing up the rear were a pair of plainclothesmen whom Jimmie knew very well--almost too well. One of these gentlemen bore a lantern which reminded Jimmie strongly of some he had seen that night guarding an open ditch in the public highway.

The Professor had fully regained consciousness and was struggling to his feet. As for Norma Manion, she had suddenly appeared, leaning weakly against the door casing, and was surveying the group in great alarm.

After being assured by O'Hara that they were her friends she smiled wanly. To Bland and the others she was, of course, an unexpected factor in the weird night's doings, and for several moments they regarded her curiously.

At length Jimmie, sensing the question in the Old Man's eyes, elected to offer a few words of explanation.

"Miss Manion has just been through a terrible experience," he said. "She and her father have been for some time at the mercy of this monster"--indicating Kell--"and her nerves are completely shattered. We'd better get her out of this as quickly as we can."

"Mike!" Hard Boiled Bland glared at one of the officers. "Don't stand there with your teeth in your gums like that. Take this girl out to my car and let her lie down. She needs a stimulant, too. If you search my car and find any red liquor in the left back door pocket, I don't know a thing about it. And stay with her so she won't be afraid to go to sleep."

She smiled in silent gratitude and allowed the plainclothesman to lead her away from that chamber of horror.

The reporter lost no time in telling Bland of his failure to find Skip Handlon. He went on to acquaint his Chief with the facts of all that had occurred while he had been at the Professor's house.

The fiery old fellow listened grimly. When Jimmie came to the story of the corpse and the cask the editor breathed one word, "Manion!"

Jimmie nodded sadly. All eyes turned to the dejected huddle on the floor that was Professor Kell. Finally Bland could wait no longer, but fixed a terrible eye on the murderer and demanded harshly, "Where's Handlon?"

Now the Professor burst into a fit of insane laughter, laughter that curdled the blood of the listeners.

"You ask me that! It's almost too good. Hee-hee! You sent your two precious reporters out to my house to

pry into my secrets, and thought to display my name all over your yellow sheet; but you forgot that you were dealing with Professor Anton Kell, didn't you?" The last he fairly shrieked. "A lot of people have tried to intrude upon me before, but none ever escaped me!"

"We know that," cut in Jimmie, for he was getting impatient and the old man's boastings seemed out of place. "You are slated for the rope anyway, after what I discovered down cellar." He jerked his eyes in the direction of the door significantly. "Now we propose to find Handlon, and the better it will be for you if you tell us what you have done with him. Otherwise...."

"You can go to hell!" screamed the maniac. "If you are so clever, find out for yourselves. He isn't so far away that you couldn't touch him by reaching out your hand. In fact, he's been with you quite a while. Hee-hee-hee! Well, if you must know--there he is!" With an insane chuckle he pointed at Horace Perry. And Perry did a strange thing.

"Yes, you fiend, here I am!" Whose voice was that?

Was it Perry speaking, or was it Skip Handlon? Most assuredly Perry stood before them, but the voice, in a subtle manner, reminded the group strongly of poor old Skip.

As he spoke Perry had launched himself at the Professor's throat and had to be restrained by the others. Savagely he fought them but slowly and surely they overcame his struggles and placed him, writhing, in a chair.

Of a sudden Bland leaned forward and scrutinized Perry's face sharply. Had the reporter gone insane too? The pupils of the eyes had taken on a sort of queer contraction, a fixed quality that was almost ludicrous. He looked like a man under hypnosis. He had gone limp in their grasp, but now suddenly he stiffened. The eyes underwent another startling change, this time glowing undoubtedly with the look of reason. Bland was mystified and waited for Perry to explain his queer conduct. The latter seemed finally to come to. Simultaneously he realized that his peculiar lapse from consciousness had been observed by the others.

“Guess I may as well admit it,” he said with a wry smile. “Ever since I came back from my assignment with Kell I have had a hell of a time. Half the time I have been in a daze and have not had the least idea what I was doing. Funny part of it is that I have seemed to keep right on doing things even while I was out of my head.” He told briefly of the visions he had had in which he had seemed to contend with his brother reporter, the horrid sensations as he felt himself overcome, the black oblivion in which he then found himself, and the mysterious manner in which he had left Keegan on that ill-fated assignment.

“What have you done to Handlon?” Jimmie’s voice cut in. He was standing over the form of the maniac, rigid and menacing. “You have exactly two minutes to go.”

“Find out for yourself!” snarled the bruised and battered fiend.

“I will,” was the answer, and on the instant a horrible shriek rent the air. Jimmie had quickly grasped both of the Professor’s arms at the wrists and was slowly twisting them in a grip of iron. Kell’s face went white,

the lips writhed back over toothless gums, the eyes closed in the supreme effort to withstand the excruciating pain. Then--

“Enough, enough!” he screamed.

O’Hara eased the pressure slightly but retained his hold upon the clawlike hands. “Talk fast,” he ordered.

The old man struggled futilely in the grasp of the powerful reporter, finally glancing in the direction of the others. Would they show signs of pity? Surely not Hard Boiled Bland. The Chief was watching the struggles of the victim through a cloud of tobacco smoke which he was slowly exhaling through his nose. The plainclothesman displayed no sign of interest at all. The game was up!

“Very well,” he said sullenly. “Handlon and Perry are both occupying the same body.”

“Wh-a-a-t?” roared Bland. “Jimmie, I guess you’ll have to put the screws to him some more. He’s trying to make fools of us at the last minute!”

“No, no!” screamed the Professor. “What I say is true. I have been working for years on my system of de-astralization. This last year I at length perfected my electric de-astralizer, which amplifies and exerts the fifth influence of de-cohesion.”

The whole party began to look uneasy and gazed apprehensively at the huge Crookes tube which still stood in its supporting frame on the table.

“I have been forced to experiment on animals for the most part,” the Professor continued. “I succeeded in de-astralizing a dog and a bull and caused them to exchange bodies. The bodies continued to function. I was enthusiastic. Other experiments took place of which I will not tell you. Finally I began to long for a human subject on which to try my fifth influence.”

“Just get down to cases, if you don’t mind, Kell.” The Chief wanted action. “Suppose you tell us just what you did to Handlon and where we can find him. I may as well mention that your life depends upon it. If we find that you have done for him, something worse than death may happen to you.” The tone was

menacing. Although Handlon was a comparatively late acquisition to the old Chief's staff, still he had been loyal to the paper.

"When your two damned reporters entered my driveway," Kell resumed. "I saw them coming through a powerful glass which I always have on hand. I had no desire to see them, but they forced themselves upon me. At last I determined that they should furnish material for my experiments.

"If your men had looked into the grove behind the barn they would have found the automobile which furnished two more subjects I was keeping on hand in a room upstairs. Old Manion and his daughter gave me quite a bit of trouble, but I kept them drugged most of the time. He broke out of the room to-night though, and I had to kill him. It was self defense," he added slyly.

"Anyway, I found it was possible to make two astrals exchange bodies. But I also wanted to see if it were possible to cause two astrals to occupy the same body at the same time, and if so what the result would be. I

found out. It was rare sport to watch your star reporter leave my house. He was damned glad to leave, I believe....” Again came the insane cackle.

“Guess we have to believe him whether we want to or not.” The detective came to life. “How about making him release Handlon’s--what d’ye call it?--astral--from Perry’s body?”

“Just a moment.” The voice now was unmistakably Handlon’s, though it was issuing from the throat of Perry. “In the minute I have in consciousness let me suggest that before you do any more de-astralizing you *locate my body*. Until then, if I am released from this one I am a dead man.”

The words struck the group dumb. Where *was* Handlon’s body? Could the Professor produce it?

That worthy looked rather haunted at that moment, and they began to see the fear of death coming upon him.

“Mercy, mercy!” he begged as the four men started to

advance upon him. "As soon as I had de-astralized Handlon I destroyed his body in my pickling barrel down cellar. But there is another way..." He paused, uncertain as to how his next words would be received. "Go out and get the Manion girl. She can be de-astralized and friend Handlon can have her body."

At this suggestion, advanced so naïvely, the four men recoiled in horror. It was entirely too much even for Hard Boiled Bland, and he could hardly restrain himself from applying the editorial fist to the leering face before him. Undoubtedly Professor Kell was hopelessly insane, and for that reason he held himself in leash.

"Kell, you are slated to pull off one more stunt," Jimmie addressed the cringing heap. "You know what it is. Get busy. And just remember that I am standing over here"--he indicated a corner well separated from the rest--"with this cannon aimed in your direction. If things aren't just according to Hoyle, you get plugged. Get me?"

"What about it, men?" Bland spoke up. "Is it going to

be treating Handlon right to de-astralize him now? It will be his last chance to have a body on this earth.”

“Unfortunately that body never belonged to Handlon,” said O’Hara. “Hence I fail to see why Perry should be discommoded for the balance of his life with a companion astral. Perry is clearly entitled to his own body, free and unhampered. Friend Skip is out of luck, unless--Well, I don’t mind telling you, Kell, that you just gave me an idea. Snap into it now!”

The Professor dragged himself to his feet and under the menace of the automatic fumbled under the table until he had located the intricate apparatus before mentioned.

“Now if Mr. Perry--or Handlon--will kindly recline at full length on this table,” he said with an obscene leer, “the experiment will begin.”

“Just remember, Kell, this is no experiment,” advised Bland, fixing the Professor with an ugly eye. “You do as you’re told.”

The other made no reply, but threw a hidden switch. Perry, lying flat on his back on the ancient table, suddenly found himself being bathed by what seemed to be a ray of light, and yet was not a ray of light. What was it? It was surely not visible, yet it was tangible. A terrific force was emanating from that devilish globe above him, drawing him out of himself--or--no--was he expanding? Again his ears became filled with confused, horrible sounds, the outlines of the room faded from sight, he felt a strange sense of inflation ... of lightness.... Oblivion!



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From where the others sat a gasp of wonder went up. At the first contact of the switch there had been a momentary flash of greenish light within the bulb, and then a swift transition to a beautiful orange. It

had then faded altogether, leaving the glass apparently inert and inactive.

But it was not so! The form lying beneath the bulb was evidently being racked with untold tortures. The face became a thing of horror. Now it had twisted into a grotesque semblance of Handlon's--now it again resembled Perry's. The Professor quietly increased the pressure of the current. From the bulb emanated a steel gray exhalation of what must be termed light, and yet so real it was seemingly material. Assuredly it was not a ray of light as we understand light. It came in great beating throbs, in which the actual vibrations were entirely visible. Under each impact the body of Perry seemed to change, slowly at first, then with increasing speed. The body was now swelled to enormous size. Bland reached forward to touch it.

"This de-cohering influence," the Professor was murmuring, almost raptly, "causes the atoms that go to make a living body repel one another. When the body is sufficiently nebulized, the soul--Back! Back, you fool!" he suddenly shrieked, grasping Bland by the arm. "Do you want to kill him?"

Bland hurriedly retreated, convinced perforce that Kell's alarm was genuine. The editorial fingers had penetrated the subject's garments without resistance and sank into the body as easily as if it were so much soft soap!

The body continued to expand until at length even the hard-headed plainclothesman realized that it had been reduced to a mere vapor. Within this horrid vaporized body, which nearly filled the room and which had now lost all semblance to a man, could be discerned two faint shapes. Swiftly the Professor extinguished the lantern. The shapes, vague though they were, could be recognized as those of Horace Perry and Skip Handlon. And they were at strife!

All eyes were now focused on Professor Kell, who was evidently waiting for something to happen. The two apparitions within the body-cloud were at death grips. One had been overcome and was temporarily helpless. It was that of Handlon. And then again the astral of Perry forcibly ousted that of Handlon from the cloud-cyst. And at that instant Professor Kell shut off the influence-tube.

At once a terrific metamorphosis took place. There came a sharp sound almost like a clap of thunder, with the slight exception that this was occasioned by exactly the reverse effect. Instead of being an explosion it might more properly be termed an *inplosion*, for the mist-cloud suddenly vanished. The de-cohering influence having been removed, the cloud had condensed into the form of Perry. Apparently none the worse, he was even now beginning to recover consciousness. The astral of Handlon was no longer visible, though hovering in the vicinity.

Perry's body was again his own.

At this time Jimmie O'Hara elected to start something new by hitting the Professor a workmanlike blow on the back of the head with the butt of his automatic. The next thing Bland or anyone else present knew the unconscious body of the Professor was on the table and Jimmie was groping for the concealed switch. At length he found it, and the green flash of light appeared in the bulb, followed by the brilliant orange manifestation.

“What in hell are you doing?” gasped Bland.

“De-astralizing the Professor,” replied O’Hara cheerfully. “Don’t you get the idea yet? Watch!”

Fascinated, the four men saw the terrific emanation take its baleful effect. As before, the body commenced to expand and gradually took on a misty outline. Larger and larger it grew, until finally it had become a vast cloud of intangible nothingness which filled the room like some evil nebula.

A cry of consternation from the detective aroused Jimmie. Skip Handlon’s astral had appeared within the field of the nebula to fight for possession. There ensued what was perhaps the weirdest encounter ever witnessed. Though he was in poor physical shape, the Professor seemed to have an extremely powerful astral; and for some time the spectators despaired of Handlon’s victory. Once the latter, evidently realizing that the powerful influence tube had rendered him visible, glanced sharply in Jimmie’s direction. O’Hara was considerably puzzled at this, but watched the progress of the struggle tensely. At

length the moment seemed to arrive which the reporter's astral had been awaiting. It turned tail and fled away from the astral of the Professor, disappearing beyond the outer confines of the nebula.

Jimmie suddenly divined the other's purpose and dived for the hidden switch. As he had anticipated, Handlon had finally given up the attempt to overcome the astral of Kell by force and had made up his mind to accomplish his end by strategy. Almost on the instant that Jimmie's hand closed on the switch the reporter's astral again leaped into the field of the nebula. Fiercely it signalled to the former second story man to shut off the current, but the admonition was unnecessary, for Jimmie had already done so.

Swiftly the cloud-cyst faded. Even as the group caught a fleeting sight of Skip Handlon, the last that mortal eyes would ever see of him as he actually was, there came a violent disturbance at the edge of the shrinking nebula. Would the speed of condensation of the atoms which comprised the body of Professor Kell serve to shut out the pursuing astral of Kell?

Even Bland held his breath!

The cloud lost its luminous quality, the action of condensation increasing in speed. It was barely visible in the enshrouding gloom. An astral had long since been enveloped within the rapidly accumulating substance. Came a sudden clap of sound as before, and the final act of resolution had been accomplished. Whether the Professor had succeeded in regaining a position within the cloud-cyst before the crucial second none could say.

Jimmie relighted the lantern. Apparently the effect of the love tap administered by his automatic was more or less of a lasting character, and the men were put to some ado to restore the body of Kell to consciousness. At length their efforts began to bear fruit, however, and it became expedient to remove the patient to the softer couch in the sitting room below. As they moved forward to lay hold of the limp body a figure appeared in the doorway to the hall. It was the plainclothesman, Riley.

“How about getting under way for town,” he wanted

to know. "Is the old party croaked yet? Miss Manion has had a fierce time and says she won't stay near this house another minute. I don't like this place myself either. Do you know I just got kicked by a poll parrot? Let's get away from here."

"Hold on, Riley, what are you talking about?" growled Bland. "Kicked by a poll parrot! You're--"

"That's all right, Chief," broke in the now thoroughly cheerful Perry. "That jackass I shot could probably have told us all about it. I positively know the beast could talk."

"Humph!" snorted Bland, "Well, if a donkey can talk, and a bull can bite, and a hound can hook, why shouldn't a parrot--Judas Priest, I'm getting as crazy as the rest of you! Hurry up and get Kell downstairs so we can see who he is. There I go again! Oh, go lie down, Riley."

"But look, Bland, look!" Riley was pointing a demoralized finger at a cage in the corner. He tugged frantically at Bland's coat sleeve. "See what's in

there, won't you? I--well, I did find some liquor in your car, and Miss Manion made me take some. I--I didn't know it would do this to me. Look in there; please, Mr. Bland!"

Bland gave Riley a dark look, but nevertheless he reached for O'Hara's flashlight. In the cage two yellow eyes blinked sleepily out at him. Perry began to laugh.

"Why, there's nothing in there but a cat. Skip and I heard it purring when we first came in here this afternoon. Guess Riley--"

"Great God, Jimmie, give me your gun!" Hard Boiled Bland for the moment failed to merit his sobriquet. The torch in his hand threw a trembling beam full into the cage. "It's a snake! And--there! It's doing it again!"

A snake it was, indubitably, a huge black specimen with bright yellow stripes. Bland's frenzied yell seemed not to have excited it at all, for now the sleek fellow had arched its body neatly and was calmly

licking its sides with a long forked tongue. After a moment it halted the operation long enough to rub its jaw against a bar of its cage, and gave vent to a sociable mew!

Even this could not dash the spirits of Horace Perry. He laughed delightedly again as he laid Bland by the arm.

“That creature is perfectly harmless, Chief,” he told the editor. “Somewhere I suppose there’s a mighty dangerous kitty cat at large, but there’s no sense in taking it out on this poor reptile. Let’s live and let live.”

With a show of reluctance Bland returned Jimmie’s automatic, then strode over to where lay the form of Kell. Perry and O’Hara lingered by the cage long enough to arrange a plan to let the snake out doors as soon as opportunity offered, after which they joined their Chief. Riley went out to resume his vigil in Bland’s car, while his fellow sleuth prepared to light the way downstairs. Under his guidance the sick man was carried below without mishap.

Downstairs the now conscious form of the venerable Professor was laid out on the ancient sofa until his senses could clear a bit. Presently the eyelids fluttered open and a feeble voice asked, “Where the deuce am I, and how did all you guys get here?”

A joyous gasp went up. That voice! Although uttered in somewhat the same vocal quality as Kell’s the intonation and accents had strangely altered. O’Hara leaned eagerly over the figure on the couch. The question he asked was startling in its incongruity:

“How are you feeling, *Skip!*”

“Rotten,” was the reply from the lips of Kell. “What hit me such a crack on the dome? I feel as if I had been dragged through a knot-hole. Lemme up.”

“Stay still,” commanded O’Hara, kindly but firmly. “You aren’t fit to move yet. You are going on a long ride and will need your strength. Don’t talk, either.”

A half-hour later they left the house. In the front yard the editor called a hasty conclave which included the

entire party. Hard Boiled Bland has never been known to talk so much at a stretch, before or since.

“Before we start back,” he began, “we had better come to an understanding. In the first place--Skip, come over here a minute.”

Norma Manion uttered an involuntary cry of fear as the aged form of Kell passed by her. Skip’s instant response to his name had, of course, been perfectly natural to him. But it had an odd effect on the others.

“Miss Manion, and gentlemen,” Bland went on, with a bow of mock ceremony, “I want you to meet Mister--er, Mister--oh hell, call him Saunders. This is Mr. Kenneth Saunders, ladies and gentlemen. When he gets a shave and has his new face patched up I believe you will like his appearance much more than you do now.

“Seriously though, folks, I hope that with a little fixing up the gentleman will hardly resemble Professor Anton Kell. Kell is dead. Obviously, however, this gentleman can hardly continue his existence as Skip

Handlon. Hence--well, hence Mr. Saunders. And don't forget the name.

"Now another little matter. This house has proven a curse to humanity. What has transpired here need never be known. Would it not be the wiser to eliminate all traces of to-night's happenings? There is a way." He looked significantly at the others.

"You mean--" began Perry.

"That we destroy all traces of Professor Kell's villainy. Although he is no more, still someone might notice that *his body actively remains*. And no one wants to do any explaining."

"It's the only way we can protect Handlon," one of the sleuths ruminated, half to himself. "No judge would ever believe a word about this de-astralization business. The chances are we would all go to the booby hatch and Handlon would go to prison for Kell's crimes."

"There were four of us that witnessed the fact of the--

the soul transfusion, though,” Perry objected.

“Wouldn’t that be enough to clear Skip? Besides, wouldn’t it be possible for us to lead a jury out here and duplicate the experiment?”

“Too much undesirable publicity,” growled Bland, who for once in his life had found reason to keep something good out of the headlines. “What do you say, people?”

“I move we move,” from the detective who had had the uncomfortable job of attending to Norma Manion.

“Gentleman, I believe we understand each other,” said Jimmie quietly. “Now I am going into the barn”—significantly—“to see if everything’s all right. While I am there something *might* happen. You understand?”

The others nodded silent assent.

In the snug seat of Jimmie’s speedster Norma Manion shivered as she followed the direction indicated by her companion’s finger. It was that darkest hour which comes just before the dawn.

To the westward could be perceived a dull, red glow, which, even as they watched with fascinated eyes, developed into an intense glare. Gradually the fading stars became eclipsed in the greater glory.

Three cars, motors throbbing as if eager to be gone, stood a space apart on the main road. The car behind O'Hara's was the Manion machine, now occupied by Bland and Riley. The remaining one was a touring car and contained the balance of the party. Perry was at the wheel, and beside him sat the Handlon-Kell-Saunders combination.

"Thus passes a den of horror," whispered Jimmie to his companion.

"It is the funeral pyre of my father," the girl answered simply. She had long since recovered from her initial outburst of grief at her loss, and now watched the progress of the conflagration dry-eyed. At length Jimmie slipped an arm protectingly about the trembling shoulders.

"You have seen enough," he said. As the three cars

raced from the scene of the holocaust, faint streamers
in the east told of the rising orb of day.

“Good-by, Keegan, forever,” murmured Norma.

“Amen,” O’Hara devoutedly agreed.